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Explaining the Frequency of Contact between Generations in Germany

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Explaining the Frequency of Contact between Generations in Germany

Theoretical and methodological discussions, empirical results, and open questions¹

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A consideration of recent demographic trends, the historically unique longevity, and the political discussion about social security and care for the elderly makes it apparent that the topic of intergenerational relationships is getting more and more important – not only for politics, but also for social research in the field of family sociology and gerontology. A closer look at the huge quantity of studies in this field reveals a number of limitations for Germany. Firstly, only some aspects of intergenerational relationships are captured in the present empirical data. Secondly, most studies focus on the relations between adult children and their older parents. Information about intergenerational relationships founded on a broader empirical basis is missing. And, as a third point, the theoretical debate reveals some significant conceptual shortcomings. To narrow these gaps, this paper first discusses the theoretical and empirical results of the current debate about intergenerational relations. In a second step our own empirical data are presented: these capture many different aspects of the relations between generations. Finally, suggestions will be made for ways to close the theoretical gap.

I. Some Remarks on the Theoretical Discussion about Intergenerational Relationships

A great many views and theoretical conceptualizations about intergenerational relationships are presently in circulation (see Katz et al. 2005). One of the most important strands of discussion is the so-called *theory of intergenerational solidarity* (see e.g. Bengtson/Schrader 1982; Bengtson/Roberts 1991; Roberts et al. 1991; Bengtson 2001; Mangen et al. 1988). In this tradition many different aspects of contact and supportive behavior within the family and between their members are discussed. Intergenerational solidarity is thus understood as any form of exchange between the generations in one family. Normally six different dimensions are differentiated, which have been termed structural, associative, affectual, consensual, functional, and normative solidarity.

¹ This paper was presented at the conference on “Intergenerational Relationships in Family and Society” at the Social Science Research Center Berlin, March 7-8, 2007. A conference reader edited by Chiara Saraceno will be prepared.

Structural solidarity refers to the opportunity structure which at least partly determines the specific realization of family interactions. In connection with this the geographical distance or proximity is often mentioned, but age, sex, marital status, health status, or working arrangements can also be important factors influencing intergenerational relationships. *Associative solidarity* means the amount and kind of intergenerational contact, either face-to-face or via phone, e-mail, or in any other possible form. Thereby frequency and intensity can be distinguished. *Affectual solidarity* captures the emotional closeness and the quality of the relationship between children and their parents. *Consensual solidarity* measures the amount of agreement in values and beliefs – whatever the specific content of these convictions may be. *Normative solidarity* registers the extent of traditional family values held by the related persons. And – as a last point – *functional solidarity* measures all kinds of financial, instrumental, emotional, and informational support of parents to their children and vice versa. Figure 1 gives an overview of this conceptual frame of reference for intergenerational relations.

Figure1: Dimensions of Intergenerational Relationships

Empirical fact	Theoretical construct	Definition
Family structure; residential proximity	Structural solidarity	Opportunity structure for intergenerational relations
Frequency of contact	Associational solidarity	Kind and frequency of interaction between family members
Emotional closeness	Affectual solidarity	Extent of emotional closeness between family members
Attitudinal similarity	Consensual solidarity	Extent of similarity in norms and attitudes between family members
Normative orientations	Normative solidarity	Extent of normative obligation to support the family
Exchange	Functional solidarity	Extent of financial, instrumental and emotional support between family members

Even this short description makes it clear that the theory of intergenerational solidarity focuses on the relations of adult children to their mostly old parents. To analyze other phases of life, for example the relations of younger children or adolescents to their parents, the theoretical frame has to be reconceptualized. But the theoretical debate focuses more on another topic: the idea of ambivalence. The various types of interaction involved in intergenerational relations within families are not always positive. They are often characterized as positive and negative at the same time or merely as ambivalent (Connidis/McMullin 2002; Lüscher/Pillemer 1998; Lüscher/Pajung-Bilger 1998; Lüscher 2002, 2004; Lüscher/Liegle 2003). There is an intense debate whether a special theory of intergenerational ambivalence is necessary, which stresses that family relations are governed by a logic of their own which secures a higher amount of stability even if there is considerable conflict in a relationship. In order to integrate these arguments into the theory of intergenerational solidarity the so-called solidarity-conflict-model was developed (Bengtson et

al. 2002; Giarrusso et al. 2005; Schmeeckle et al. 2006) which adds a seventh dimension, conflict, to the original scheme. Whether ambivalence is measured directly, for example by asking about the amount of simultaneously positive and negative, and thus ambivalent, emotions, or whether it is constructed out of emotional closeness and conflict is an open discussion.

II. A Systematic View of the Empirical Work on Intergenerational Relationships

The concept of intergenerational solidarity and the ongoing discussion provide the theoretical background for a huge amount of empirical studies – a fact which can only be understood as a reaction to all theoretical ideas proclaiming the end of the family in modern times (Silverstein/Bengtson 1997). In this section an analytical frame will be presented to give an overview of these different empirical contributions. Four different approaches can be differentiated.

(1) First of all the dimensional structure of intergenerational relations is analyzed. It is shown that the different types of intergenerational contact and exchange can be measured independently. Thus “solidarity should not be viewed as a higher-order linear composite of affect, association, and consensus” (Roberts /Bengtson 1990: p. 17; see also Mangen et al. 1988; Atkinson et al. 1986). But there are few studies which conceptualize all proposed dimensions of intergenerational contact simultaneously: usually the direct interaction between generations, the emotional closeness or quality, or any other special kind of support is focused on. Nowadays – related to the discussion about ambivalence – some studies concentrate again on intergenerational conflict as well.

(2) A second strand of studies looks at any conceivable single dimension of intergenerational relations, examining the amount of contact and exchange. To sum up the various results: the relations between generations are strong and persistent. This holds true not only for the United States, where most studies can be found, but also for many other countries which were examined singly² or as a part in international comparative studies.³ Looking at the results of these studies, Silverstein and Bengtson (1997: 438) report, for example, that around 70% of their respondents are in contact at least once a week with their mother and around 60% with their father. Also the affectual solidarity or the emotional closeness is very high: in Germany, according to the so-called Socioeconomic Panel, between 70 and 92% of all dyads have very close or close relationships, depending of the gender constellation and the generation asked

² Here, for example, the German Ageing Survey (*Alterssurvey*) has to be mentioned (see Kohli/Künemund 2005a).

³ One prominent example is the study “Old Age and Autonomy: the Role of Service Systems and Intergenerational Family Solidarity” (OASIS) (see for more details <http://oasis.haifa.ac.il>), in which Norway, the United Kingdom, Germany, Spain and Israel participated. Also the “Survey of Health, Aging and Retirement in Europe (SHARE)” is interesting in this context (see Bösch-Supan/Jürges 2005 or Bösch-Supan et al. 2005).

(Szydlik 1995). The highest results are found for mothers and their relation to their daughters, and the lowest results for sons and their relation to their fathers – a result which is generally discussed under the label intergenerational stake hypothesis (Bengtson/Kuypers 1971; Giarusso et al. 1995). With regard to so-called functional solidarity or simply the help and support relations between children and their parents, the results are not so consistent. In these a differentiation between the durability and the extent of the helping behavior is required, but neediness also has to be included. Thus, results concerning helping and supportive behavior should be different for young persons with healthy parents compared to older and poor children with very needy parents. Despite these difficulties a high degree of mutual help can also be reported here. For example, one out of three respondents in the United States answered that he or she had received and given such help to his or her mother (Silverstein/Bengtson 1997: 438). As for the fathers a little less than 30% gave the same answer (see also Lawton et al. 1994b: 29ff). Extending the frame of analysis to three generations, a perspective which will get increasingly important, the so-called sandwich generation especially is giving help to both sides, but the flow of money is going downwards (see for Germany Szydlik 2000: 99ff; Alt 1994; Marbach 1997). In addition greater gifts and inheritance have to be taken into consideration (Hansert 2003; Lettke 2004; Kohli 2004). With regard to the potential for conflict and thus to ambivalence, intergenerational relations seem not to be dominated by conflicts, although they of course exist. For Germany, around 10% of the respondents reported intergenerational conflicts (Szydlik 2001:587); in the OASIS study this proportion rises to one third (see Katz et al. 2005: 402; see here also for a different operationalization). Ambivalence seems to be a common experience, although one has to keep in mind that most studies focus on the relation between adult children and their (sometimes very old) parents, which normally has a greater potential for conflict (Lettke/Lüscher 2001: 525; 2002: 448f.; Pillemer/Suitor 2002: 606ff.). Taking all these and other results together leads to the conclusion that the general speculation about declining family and intergenerational relations in modern times seems to be wrong. Intergenerational relations are – not least due to the changing demographic structure – increasingly important in modern societies, having an impact upon the wider society as well as the individuals themselves.

(3) A third group of studies tries to combine these different dimensions of intergenerational solidarity by constructing family typologies (for an overview see Lüscher/Liegle 2003: 279-285). The general idea is that the different dimensions are not unrelated and that they have to be looked at in combination (Silverstein et al. 1994). Silverstein and Bengtson (1997: 444) identify five types, which they call 'tight-knit', 'sociable', 'obligatory', 'intimate but distant' and 'detached' (see also Bengtson 2001; van Gaalen/Dykstra 2006). In a next step the individual parent-child-dyads are situated in one of these types according to their gender composition, whether it is a daughter-mother, daughter-father, son-mother or son-father-dyad, the family status, age,

education, ethnicity or race, and other sociostructural factors (Silverstein et al. 1994: 47f.). In Germany families with a high degree of functional, affective, and associative solidarity are the dominant type (Szydlik 2000: 113). Other studies have also taken ambivalence into consideration, and it can be shown that “an ambivalent type emerges as both a discernible and sizable category for parents” (Giarrusso et al. 2005: 418; see also Fingerman et al. 2004, Wilson et al. 2003 and Steinbach 2007).

(4) A fourth and final bundle of studies can be characterized by different attempts to identify independent factors that determine the parent-child-relationship (see Bengtson et al. 1976). The focus lies especially on the contact between the generations, the emotional closeness, and the different exchange relations between children and parents and therefore on associative, affectual, and functional solidarity. The basic model is simple: one or some of these dimensions are used as the independent variable. Three types of studies can be differentiated which try to explain this independent variable.

(i) First, there are studies which try to attribute the variance in one of the solidarity dimensions to general sociostructural factors. Here, the sociopolitical regime is mentioned first. One of the main characteristics of such a regime is the amount and range of support provided by the state. Two different hypotheses can be distinguished: crowding out and crowding in. The first posits that higher state expenditure will lead to a reduced amount of private support for the elderly. The opposite thesis proclaims a supplementary relation between private and public expenditure. Although theoretically plausible, no hint of crowding out effects can be found empirically. Public and private transfers seem to be complementary (Attias-Donfut 1993; 2000). By taking historical experiences into consideration differences between Eastern and Western Germany can be supposed. But empirically they are negligible (Grünendahl/Martin 2005: 254; but see Szydlik 1995: 86ff. and Szydlik/Schupp 1998). Also gender and gender composition may have an influence on the intergenerational relations (Kaufman/Uhlenberg 1998; Szydlik 1995; Rossi 1993; Berger/Fend 2005: 21ff.). It can be shown that women still play the role of kinkeepers (Atkinson et al. 1986: 415; Rossi/Rossi 1990) and therefore the relations between daughters and mothers especially are very close.

(ii) A second class of models looks for intrafamilial factors which influence the degree of intergenerational exchange, sympathy, and interaction. First of all, the residential proximity is mentioned. With increasing distance the frequency of direct support decreases because direct interaction is necessary. Financial support as the second dimension of functional solidarity is not influenced by residential distance (Marbach 1994: 110; Bengtson et al. 1976). Looking at direct communication a curvilinear effect is reported. Surprisingly, this same effect can be found for affectual closeness (Szydlik 1995; Szydlik/Schupp 1998). In a next step family structure is taken into consideration. Surprisingly no effect of the numbers and gender composition of the offspring on the closeness of the relation to parents is found (Spitze/Logan 1991; Künemund/Rein 2002;

but see also Szydlik 1995). In modern societies it seems absolutely necessary to widen the research perspective to three generations. Grandparents can influence parent-child-relations in a great variety of ways: they can offer help and support, but sometimes the care-risk rises with age, and from both sides there can be claims to the so-called sandwich generation (Kohli/Künemund 2005b). In addition the internal family dynamic and especially the stability of the family system are important: all relations to fathers suffer extremely after divorce, in a short- and a long-term perspective (Cooney/Uhlenberg 1990). But also other status passages or events are important. Here, health risks, changes in the family status such as births, or changes in the occupational status and geographical mobility are important (Kaufman/Uhlenberg 1998). Furthermore, the normal life course has to be considered: in different phases the neediness and the claims change (Cooney/Uhlenberg 1992). Finally, there are some hints that experiences of generational relations in early childhood and adolescence also influence the quality of parent-child-relations in later life (Whitbeck et al. 1994: 91; Parrott/Bengtson 1999; Berger/Fend 2005).

(iii) Lastly, a third type of study which focuses on the internal structure of the different dimensions of intergenerational relations or solidarity can be found. Bengtson et al. (1976: 258) present a “multivariate model of solidarity between the older and the middle generations“, whereby the so-called associative, affectual, and consensual solidarity is influenced by the migration history, common life experiences, and mostly by the spatial distance or proximity and the neediness of the elderly and, thus, by the so-called structural solidarity. In a first empirical analysis these different factors are investigated separately (Atkinson et al. 1986). Later latent structural models are used (Roberts/Bengtson 1990). As a result a model is presented which uses the frequency of contact as the dependent variable, which itself is influenced by the emotional closeness of children to their parents and of parents to their children, the equity of exchange between the generations, and the family norms of children and parents. Furthermore, the emotional closeness is dependent upon the normative orientations and the exchange between the generations. Ultimately, this exchange relation is influenced by normative orientations (Roberts/Bengtson 1990: S18). In a next step the opportunity structure is considered (Bengtson/Roberts 1991: 859; Roberts et al. 1991: 24). Lawton et al. (1994a) investigate the interdependency between emotional and residential closeness in which both causal directions are important, at least for the relations to mothers (Lawton et al. 1994a: 64). When normative solidarity is included in such models, Whitbeck et al. (1994: S92) report: “Finally, filial concern, rather than contemporary relationship quality, more consistently predicted instrumental and emotional support“. Nearly all studies reported use the frequency of contact as the dependent variable. But Rossi and Rossi (1990) focus on the functional solidarity and thereby on the exchange of support, help, and goods (see also Roberts et al. 1990: 25ff.).

II. Arrangements of Intergenerational Relationships: the Case of Germany

Looking at the reported empirical results and also at the theoretical discussion briefly sketched in the first part of this contribution makes it obvious that for Germany there are many missing links. First of all, the empirical work on intergenerational relations is limited by focusing on only a few of all relevant kinds of interactions between generations. Secondly, most studies originate in the field of gerontology which means that their target population is limited to adult children and their old or indeed very old parents. Of course, this is the most important perspective if one is interested in social policy and the potential of families in this field. But when intergenerational relations are understood in a wider sense with the aim to understand the development of these relationships during the life course, the perspective has to be broadened.

To be sure that the first impression described above is not misleading, we will begin by looking briefly at all potentially available data for Germany. A first point of reference is always the German General Social Survey "Allgemeine Bevölkerungsumfrage in den Sozialwissenschaften (ALLBUS)", which has been conducted regularly since 1980. Surprisingly there is very little information concerning intergenerational relationships: only in the ISSP network modules in the 2002 survey are questions about contact and residential proximity, but even functional solidarity is not measured sufficiently broadly or in enough detail that it can be used. Therefore, intergenerational relations cannot be analyzed with these data. In other years even this little information is not available. A second point of reference is the so-called Socioeconomic Panel (SOEP), which has been conducted since 1984. Because of the leading aim of this study sociological aspects are taken into consideration only in a small part. Therefore just emotional closeness is measured and consequently only one of all the conceivable dimensions of intergenerational solidarity described above. In the meantime there are also three waves from the years 1988, 1994, and 2000 of the so-called German Family Survey (Bien 1994) available. Here a general interaction, support, and exchange network is surveyed with the help of name generators. So it is possible in principle to measure different types of intergenerational solidarity. But it is impossible to differentiate between family members not named by the name generator and those who are not available. It is for example an open question whether one does not have any contact to the new wife of one's father after a divorce or whether one's father is still single. The resultant available picture is very biased towards a high intergenerational solidarity because there are no questions regarding weak or even nonexistent ties. It is even harder to use these data because the questioning has changed between the three waves, and the selection of the respondents is also biased towards older and less mobile persons. As an alternative different data sets with a more gerontological background are now available for Germany which altogether focus more or less on intergenerational relations. Here the Berlin Study of Older People (BASE) and the German Ageing Survey have

to be mentioned. But as sketched above, due to their interest in older and very old people their potential to analyze the general mechanisms determining why intergenerational relations are established and maintained is limited. The same argument holds for the project of Health, Aging and Retirement in Europe (SHARE), where in addition the focus is more on functional exchange between the generations.⁴

All these problems and limitations were a driving force behind the idea to incorporate a module about intergenerational relations in the *DFG* (German Research Foundation) priority programme *Panel Analysis of Intimate Relationships and Family Dynamics (PAIRFAM)*. The most important aim of this module is to include and empirically operationalize all theoretically important aspects of intergenerational relations.⁵ The design of this survey makes it possible to investigate cohort differences and the different views of parents and children regarding their relation. In addition, all relevant relations to stepparents are included. It is also possible to research intergenerational relation in a very early stage – starting in adolescence and focusing on younger cohorts. Of course, the data collected in the so-called Pairfam-Minipanel – described later in detail – are not representative of Germany, especially as they all come from an urban context and include only three age cohorts. But they are useful for a first description and especially for explanatory models since – as far as we know – all relevant dimensions of intergenerational relations are operationalized for the first time in Germany.

The starting point of the analysis presented here is the second wave of the just mentioned Pairfam-Minipanel data which were collected within the scope of the *DFG* priority programme. A total of 497 persons was interviewed about, among other things, a number of different aspects of their relations to their (step-)parents.⁶ Due to the reality of family life and especially the emergence of nontraditional family forms in the consequence of divorce and remarriage and all other patterns of patchwork families, the focus here is not on the responding person but on the relation of this person either to her mother, father, stepmother, or stepfather. Thus a single person can build up to four cases. As the result of this procedure a data set with 975 parent-child-dyads emerges in which, however, 20 cases have to be eliminated due to missing data in some interesting variables. In table 1 the distribution is shown of the remaining 955 dyads with respect to gender and the kind of descent relations.⁷

⁴ At least at the moment the data of the so-called OASIS-project are not available; it has to be mentioned, moreover, that the sample is biased toward urban regions.

⁵ An overview of all instruments used and some first descriptive results is presented as Working Paper 1/2007 of the project group and is available through the Internet (<http://www.pairfam.uni-bremen.de/index.php?id=43>).

⁶ In addition also the (step-)parents, children and the partners of the focus-person were interviewed. For the analysis presented in this paper the parent data were not included. Therefore, no information is at the moment available on consensual agreement or the so-called intergenerational stake hypothesis. This is at least partly motivated by the fact that, of course, information from (step-)parents is not available from all respondents.

⁷ In the survey it was first asked whether the biological parents are still alive and whether the respondent has any form of contact with them. These questions were used as a filter for all questions concerning the intergenerational relations. Due to this procedure a positive bias

Table 1: Gender composition of the dyads (in percent of all dyads)

Dyad	%
Daughter – mother	26.5
Daughter – father	22.6
Daughter – stepmother	2.6
Daughter – stepfather	4.2
Son – mother	22.2
Son – father	18.8
Son – stepmother	1.5
Son – stepfather	1.6
n = 955	
Source: Pairfam-minipanel, 2 nd wave 2006;	
Own calculations	

It can be seen that less than 10% of all dyads relate to stepfathers or stepmothers, with the latter less often represented. This can be attributed to the fact that after a divorce, children in most cases live with their mothers and so with the new partners of their mothers. Fathers and respective stepmothers are more remote. Although the minipanel data are all from an urban context and the age distribution is skewed, this proportion contradicts the often discussed scenario of the family in crisis or the family decline hypothesis.

In a first step for these dyads all dimensions of intergenerational interaction or solidarity discussed above are constructed. Associational solidarity is measured through the frequency of contact, whereby both personal meetings and remote contact through phone, e-mail, or in any other way are taken into consideration; the higher contact rate was taken as a measure of interaction. Thereby both forms of contact were taken as equivalent, although there are of course some differences. Empirically both dimensions of contact are based upon one factor, although they measure different aspects. So it is not surprising that the bivariate correlation is far from perfect ($r = 0.45$). Using just one of the two dimensions will lead to massive problems of missing data and biased information.⁸ Residential proximity is used as an indicator for structural solidarity, with the scale starting with the statement 'living more than three hours away' and ending with 'living in the same household'. Affectual closeness was measured with the help of

regarding generational solidarity is possible. Further, the respondents were asked whether they are in contact with someone they would call stepmother or stepfather. These relations were then examined further. A positive bias can also be supposed. Concerning the first point some analyses not presented here in detail show that only some now-divorced fathers are no longer in the interaction network of their children. But for further investigations one has to keep in mind that only every second new wife of the divorced biological fathers is seen as a stepmother by the respondents. It is not necessary to neglect these relations in the survey simply because the possibly adult child does not see a stepmother in the new partner of her father.

⁸ Respondents living in the same households with their parents were assigned the highest value of associative solidarity. In addition to direct or indirect contacts the respondents were asked whether they spend public holidays together, whether they go shopping with each other, and so on. This information also was used to determine the degree of common interaction.

three items from the Network of Relationship Inventory (Fuhrman/Burmester 1985).⁹ Functional solidarity or, in other words, the exchange between the generations is operationalized by asking for the giving and receiving of material, instrumental, and emotional support.¹⁰ The normative support of traditional family values was measured with three items.¹¹ Finally, conflict was also measured as a dimension of intergenerational relationships.¹² Corresponding to the discussion sketched above the concept of ambivalence also is taken into consideration by building an interaction term between affectual solidarity or emotional closeness and the frequency of conflicts. Ambivalence is thereby measured indirectly and is prevalent when there are high values of affectional closeness and a high value of conflict.

Figure 2 presents boxplots for these different dimensions. To make the interpretations easier all scales just discussed were standardized to a range from 0 to 10, where 0 means a low level of solidarity and 10 represents the highest possible level of intergenerational relations.

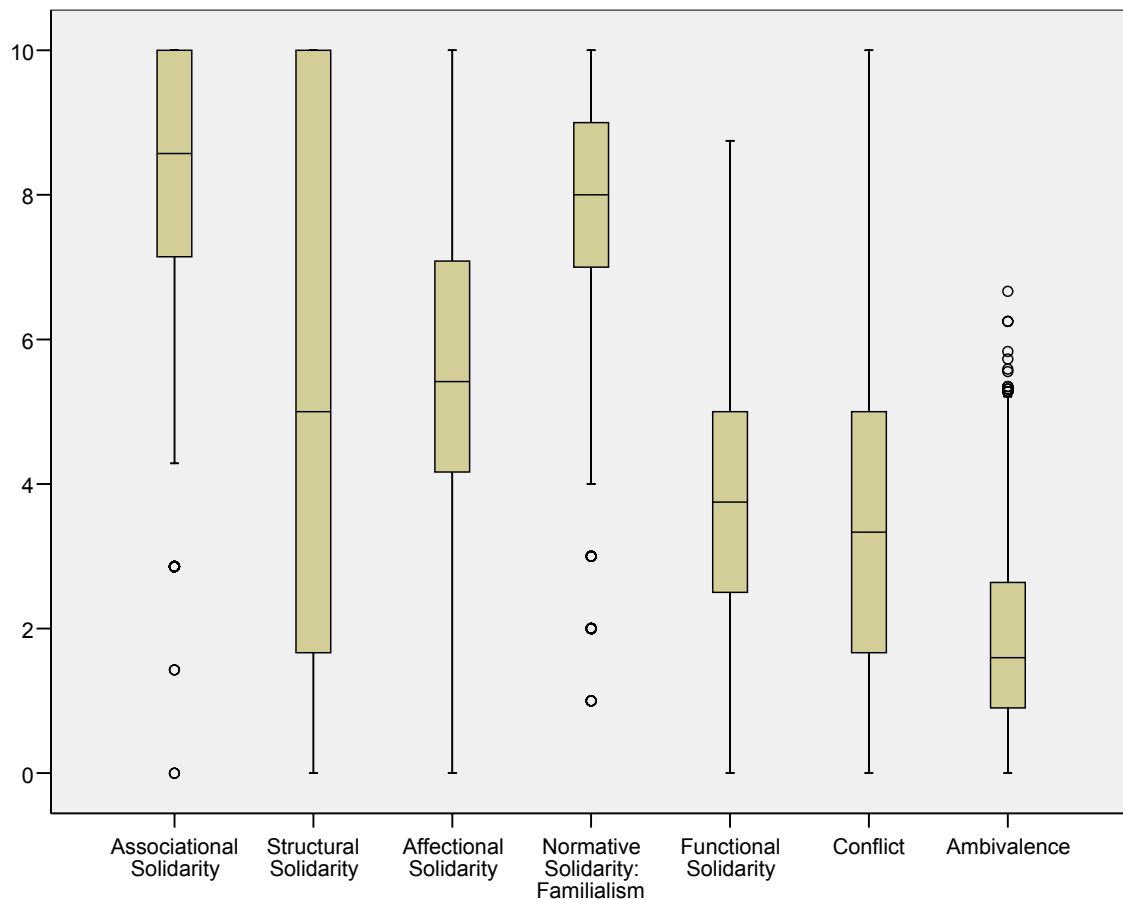
⁹ A factor analysis confirms that there is only one dimension. The resulting factor explains more than 77% of the variance; the loadings are above 0.8 and Cronbachs α of the resulting scale is 0.82.

¹⁰ Each subscale was built out of two or three items. If possible, transfers to children of the respondents (grandchildren), and so a three-generation perspective, are also used. The factor structure of the original items is not very clear. Cronbachs α is 0.73 – without the items of transfers from parents to their grandchildren because many missing values appear here.

¹¹ A factor analysis explains around 54% of the variance; the factor loadings are above 0.65. Cronbachs α is only 0.55.

¹² Here two items were used, which, as a factor analysis also shows, lie along one dimension, explaining more than 85% of the variance. Cronbachs α is 0.83.

Figure 2: Boxplots of the different dimensions of intergenerational relations



Source: Pairfam-minipanel, 2nd wave 2006; own calculations.

A closer look at these results shows first of all a remarkably high amount of *associational solidarity*. On average the respondents are in contact with their (step-)parents more than once a week. In addition the range of this variable is very small. Only very few people report a low level of contact with their (step-)parents. This result is even more astonishing when one keeps in mind that at least some of the respondents are reporting relations to four parental persons. This result can at least partly be explained through the age composition of the sample. The youngest cohort shows a mean of 9.2 – but also the two other cohorts show means of 7.5 and 7.2 and so a very high degree of contact. A simple analysis of variance results in a η^2 score of 0.19. It is interesting that there is a small but significant gender effect, whereby men show a higher contact rate than women. This effect disappears when co-residence is controlled. This is another hint that men are leaving their parental home later than women. *Structural solidarity* and thereby residential proximity show a wider range and a significantly lower mean than associational solidarity. Here, residential proximity is very different for the three cohorts: the mean is 8.3 for the youngest cohort because most of them are still living at home. The two older cohorts show much lower means (3.9 and 3.5). The wider range is more or less only a composition effect of these different cohorts. The median

of the *affectual solidarity* is only a little above the theoretical midpoint, and the variance is relatively small. Cohort effects are low; moreover gender does not play any role. As often shown in nearly all research concerning values, *family values* show a high average and low variance here as well. In contrast, neither *exchange* nor *conflict* is a dominant characteristic of parent-child-relations. The medians are the lowest of all single dimensions of intergenerational relations.¹³ Moreover, *ambivalence* logically is low in the surveyed parent-child-relations. The mean of the ambivalence scale is 6.8, the median only 6, and the distribution is noticeably skewed. Only 1.6% of all relations show ambivalence values of more than 18 and are lying therefore in the upper half of the scale. Even if ambivalence may be highly important theoretically, empirically it does not play a dominant role.¹⁴ Taking together all these results demonstrates that the debate about the family in crisis is, in Germany as in other countries, missing its empirical basis. Familial relationships between generations are strong, often in multiple dimensions.

III. Explaining Intergenerational Contact: Empirical Determinants of Associational Solidarity in Germany

As interesting as these descriptive results may be in the realm of the family decline discussion, there is, of course, some variation in the concrete realization of intergenerational relations: as can be seen in figure 1, nearly every possible case exists. And good and stable intergenerational relations are not always the same. In a next step the interest is upon explaining these empirical differences and thus the concrete form of contact and exchange. But one question remains open: which single dimension of solidarity – to use the Bengtson terminology – will serve as the most interesting dependent variable?

The starting point of the following analyses is the idea that, of course, the different aspects of intergenerational contact are more or less interdependent. To prove empirically how these different possible influences are ordered, longitudinal data are necessary. It is regrettable, but even the data used here do not fulfill these claims in every aspect. The time span covered here is only a few months and consequently too sketchy to make any tenable conclusions about the

¹³ Looking closer at the two items which build the conflict dimension reveals that nearly half of the respondents answer that they have conflicts rarely, very rarely, or never. Only in 8.4% of all parent-child-dyads do conflicts play a role in daily interactions. Thereby conflicts are more often in relations to mothers, and against all myths the lowest frequency is reported in relations to stepmothers. This effect can be explained through the frequency of interactions. It seems to be that at least some conflicts are a natural part of daily interaction. Also the highest conflict rates are reported in the youngest cohort. Even here this can be explained through the dense interaction and the lack of opportunity to avoid conflict situations if one co-resides.

¹⁴ From looking at such descriptive presentations it is obvious to ask for some explanations. In a first step the influence of some sociostructural facts are proved. Even when there is a significant age effect in nearly all dimensions, the explained variance is important only for the residential proximity ($\eta^2 = 0.39$). Other sociostructural facts such as sex, the existence of a partnership in the children's generation, or the region, the interview took place, are negligible in their explanatory power even if there are some significant results.

causal order. So only a cross-sectional analysis is possible, and one must look for a single dependent variable for the following analysis. With regard to the huge amount of research briefly discussed above three different options are available: the frequency of contact between generations or the associational solidarity, the emotional closeness or affectual solidarity, or finally the mutual exchange of support or functional solidarity.

Taking the mutual exchange of help and support first, it is possible to contribute to the actual discussion concerning social policy. However, on one hand there are many of these studies – mostly from the field of gerontology – and on the other the current data are not really very useful concerning this discussion. Due to the age composition the neediness of the parent generation is not very high, and it will not really test support in an emergency case. So this strategy will not be followed. The second possibility is to use the emotional closeness between the generations as the dependent variable. As interesting as this may be, it is known from a great deal of research about values that attitudes, values, and behavior are at least partly independent. The third and easiest strategy is then to follow the mainstream approach of the sketched literature and to choose the frequency of contact. Thus also some of the previous results for Germany can be (re-)tested. In addition contact is – following the classical argument found in exchange theory (Homans 1950; but see also Hammerström 2005) – one of the determining factors for sympathy or emotional closeness and also in most cases necessary for exchange relations. So here as well are arguments for following the more or less classical way.

In the model we present the concept of intergenerational interaction or associational solidarity described above is used as the dependent variable, and the other dimensions of intergenerational relations are taken as independent variables. In addition at least some sociostructural factors will also be taken into consideration. At least the birth cohort, the gender of the target person, the gender composition of the dyad, and whether the target person is living in a partnership or not, are enclosed in the model. Table 2 gives some descriptive information about these variables.

Table 2: Descriptive Statistics

Variable	Percent
Birth cohort 1988-90	41.9
Birth cohort 1978-80	30.2
Birth cohort 1968-70	28.0
Female respondent	55.9
Male respondent	44.1
Respondent without partner	44.4
Respondent with partner	55.6
n = 955	
Source: Pairfam-minipanel, 2 nd wave 2006;	
Own calculations	

In a next step a multivariate OLS-regression is used to determine the influencing factors for the frequency of interaction between the familial generations. Table 3 presents the so-called β -coefficients, which are standardized and therefore easier to interpret. In model 1 of table 3 all the factors just mentioned are taken into the regression model.

Even a cursory look of these results shows that the explanatory power of this model is extremely good. More than 64% of the variance can be explained. Looking at the single independent variables, the kind of relationship (whether to mothers, fathers, or stepmothers), and especially the other dimensions of intergenerational relations can explain the frequency of contact. Not surprisingly, residential proximity plays the most important role: the closer people live together, the more they are in contact. As mentioned above, due to the data structure the question of causality cannot be answered. It is conceivable that children move away from their parents to reduce contact. Furthermore, it can be argued that both constructs measure the same underlying dimension of spatial and social closeness. To prove this argument, another calculation, mode 2 in table 3, is presented in which the residential proximity is omitted. As can easily be seen, here as well the explanatory power of this model is very high, and virtually all other effects remain essentially unchanged.¹⁵ The same conclusions hold when only people who do not live in the same household with their parents are analyzed (model 3 in table 3).

¹⁵ Due to the structure of the sample in this model cohort effects are now significant. These effects occur because especially the youngest cohort lives together with their parents in the same household and therefore have a high frequency of contact.

Table 3: Explanation of the frequency of contacts between generations¹⁶ (β -coefficients)

Variable	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3
Residential proximity	0.55***	--	0.30***
Emotional closeness	0.27***	0.28***	0.32***
Normative orientation: familialism	0.01	0.03	0.03
Exchange	0.20***	0.31***	0.27***
Conflict	0.13***	0.18***	0.04
Ambivalence	-0.10**	-0.07	0.03
Birth cohort 1988-90	--	--	--
Birth cohort 1978-80	-0.02	-0.28***	-0.03
Birth cohort 1968-70	-0.01	-0.26***	0.01
Female respondent	--	--	--
Male respondent	0.01	0.08***	-0.00
Respondent without partner	--	--	--
Respondent in partnership	-0.01	-0.02	-0.01
Relation to mother	--	--	--
Relation to father	-0.04*	-0.07***	-0.07**
Relation to stepmother	-0.06***	-0.10***	-0.06*
Relation to stepfather	0.03	0.04*	0.02
*** p < 0.01	r ² = 0.64	r ² = 0.49	r ² = 0.48
** p < 0.05	n = 955	n = 955	n = 639
* p < 0.10			
n = 955			
Source: Pairfam-minipanel, 2 nd wave 2006;			
Own calculations			

With regard to the other independent factors, emotional closeness especially plays an important role. It is not really surprising that the closer the emotional tie between generations, the more often they are in contact. Contrary to all sociological traditions, normative orientations are not relevant empirically. Neither in the operationalized way presented here nor in other empirical trials is the frequency of contact between generations influenced strongly by values. The only significant effect is found for the oldest cohort: in this case high familial values do increase the contact frequency. The exchange between the generations also clearly increases the frequency of contacts. But one has to keep in mind again that also here the question of causality cannot be answered. The same argument holds true for the next and more surprising result. A higher rate of conflict increases the frequency of contact. As can be seen in model 3 in table 3 this is caused by a common household. On the contrary, a high value of ambivalence decreases the frequency of contact – at least in the first model presented in table 3. It may be a rational strategy to reduce interaction if the relation is emotionally close but conflictual. Controlling for co-residence there is no cohort effect, nor does gender per se play any role. At least in our data

¹⁶ The reference categories are birth cohort 1988-1990, women, persons without a partnership, and the relation to mother.

there is no kinkeeper-effect. Also the existence of a partnership on the part of the children fails to show any empirical effect, thus, a time-limitation argument does not apply either. The effect of the kind of relationship may be astonishing at first appearance. But it is explained by the fact that after divorce children will normally stay with their mother and then also with a potential new partner of their mother. Thus they are more acquainted with their stepfather than with their stepmother.

Taking all these results together, it could be shown that also for Germany the frequency of contact between generations can be explained quite well. Of course the presented analyses have to be extended by including a three-generation-perspective, more and other explanatory variables, or by building typologies of intergenerational relationships. This is left to further publications. Here some basic problems in theory building and the connection between the ideas about intergenerational relations and broader sociological approaches will be discussed. This work is not only interesting in itself; it seems also to be necessary in order to improve further empirical studies.

IV. Some Remarks on the Theoretical and Empirical Modeling of Intergenerational Relations

As has been shown in the theoretical discussion sketched above and also in the empirical analyses presented, there are still many missing links and theoretical gaps. This relates both to the theoretical foundation and conceptualization of intergenerational relations and to the empirical operationalization of these ideas. In the following remarks a few thoughts will be introduced to narrow these gaps and to give some idea of what the theoretical missing links could look like.

In nearly all theoretical contributions it is still an open (and usually unasked) question, why intergenerational relations are in most cases long lasting and durable and why they play an important role in everyday life for so many people – as nearly every empirical result shows. It is astonishing, but in the huge amount of literature there is barely any contribution which treats this topic. This is even more surprising since the solidarity-conflict model proposed by Bengtson and colleagues offers many connections to general sociological theories. It is possible, but not necessary, to speculate about general motives of human behavior and to incorporate these ideas here, but at least some ideas concerning how these models of social action can be connected to a model of intergenerational relations should be presented.

A first and obvious connecting point seems to be the theory of social exchange (Ekeh 1974). Two approaches can be differentiated: an individualistic and a collectivistic view. Both have in common that an ego takes an action to instigate a certain reaction on the part of an alter. It is important to integrate the idea that the giving and receiving of emotional, instrumental or financial support and every other form of social exchange takes place most of the time with a

delay. A special feature of intergenerational relations – in comparison to other social relations such as friendship – is that this time span can be extremely long. Moreover, in intergenerational relations it is even more uncertain whether the reciprocation ever happens.¹⁷ It can be argued further that intergenerational relations are used as insurance where only in the case of an emergency – however this case may be defined in detail – some form of reciprocation has to happen. Thus, the investment in children is an insurance against a potential emergency, and it is in the nature of such a relation that of course a moral-hazard-problem arises. Emotional ties can support intergenerational relations and partly solve this moral hazard-problem (Frank 1988).

Thus the attachment approach can be interpreted in a new way. Especially in the first and most formative years a very strong emotional tie is established in young families which mediates closeness and autonomy and which inhibits a clear strategic interaction within families. It is important that early in the life course a certain kind of relation is established and taken as natural. By this means a self-conscious personality can be established which is included in a dense network of familial ties. A strong emotional parent-child attachment leads to stable exchange relations (Schulze 2005; Silverstein et al. 2002) and to a positively evaluated emotional relation in later life (Berger/Fend 2005). Of course here as well no active and strategic behavior is observable, but it is easy to integrate the so-called value of children approach (Nauck 2001). At least for parents a number of good arguments can be found why it makes sense to invest in their own children. Generally a child and a parent perspective have to be differentiated whereby at least for the second perspective ideas from developmental psychology have to be incorporated. In this realm, too, normative orientation again can play an important role.

Considering these ideas which combine concepts from developmental psychology, such as attachment theory, and more sociological approaches such as ideas of social exchange, it is obvious that traditional economic and straightforward calculating behavior is not important empirically. Concerning the uncertainty of the future and the long-term character of intergenerational relations, it simply makes no sense – to present just one example – to combine the amount of parental investment directly with a potential pay-off in the future. It is more suitable to combine the ideas just presented with a life-course-perspective (see Schneewind/Ruppert 1995; Schneewind 2000; 2001). Furthermore, in the attachment approach it is assumed that critical and especially important phases occur in the first month of life. Here the further developmental path of the relation will be fixed. It can be added that these critical phases cannot be found only in the first month, but may also occur in the further life course. Status passages especially – both from parents and children – test the stability of

¹⁷ Gouldner (1960: 170) argues that social exchange is oriented on a norm of reciprocity by which exchange only happens when giving and receiving is balanced, at least in the long-term. How parent-child-relations are influenced by this idea is an interesting discussion (Hollstein/Bria 1998: 7).

intergenerational relations. They can strengthen or weaken the bond between generations. That may be one of the reasons why the quality of intergenerational relations in the early life course has only an indirect influence on further developments (Berger/Fend 2005). Changes in the family composition should be particularly important – for example a birth, a separation and divorce, or a new partnership.

Together with previously published information, the ideas, results, and theoretical observations presented here make it clear that there is a fairly broad gap between theoretical arguments and empirical procedures. Thus it is legitimate to ask whether associative solidarity or frequency of contact is really the most interesting dependent variable. Moreover, the public discussion about the changing demographic structure makes the factors influencing emotional closeness or exchange patterns between the generations especially pertinent. In further analyses the interdependence structure of the different dimensions of intergenerational relations will be focused on. To do this, panel data about a (relatively) long time frame are necessary.

Even more important are some theoretical objections just discussed: many of the contributions concentrate – as this one – on the internal structure of the different aspects of intergenerational relations. But it seems to be more important – and at least now possible – to focus more on sociological and sociostructural factors. What roles do occupational status, religion, or education play? Is there any influence from different familial structures such as the number and sex of siblings? How does an extension to a three-generation perspective change the results? Aside from the problems just mentioned, relations to grandparents or even great-grandparents will have positive aspects. As in the analysis presented above generally one also has to take new family forms such as step-parenthood into consideration, in which it is of course important to locate changes in family structure in the life course.

To answer these research questions requires data sets which cover much longer time periods than those available now. This may be the reason why all studies either rely on retrospective data (Rossi/Rossi 1990; Whitbeck et al. 1994) which have to be biased with regard to the most interesting theoretical mechanisms at the particular time, or are forced to interpret cross-sectional data of different age cohorts in a life-course perspective (Cooney/Uhlenberg 1992). As one exception the study of Berger and Fend (2005) using real panel data has to be mentioned. But this kind of data is necessary – and perhaps that is the most important point – in order to prove empirically the sketched theoretical ideas and mechanisms concerning the influence of early childhood factors or other critical life events.

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